

THE AGENTS OF PUBLIC CHANGE – POLICIES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS REGARDING THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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Abstract:

The present policies of global organizations regarding the promotion of children's participation in decision-making process on public development is characterized by consistency and the use of non-traditional approaches. Unfortunately, this current issue has not been adequately explored in the various academic studies. This work aims to analyze the existence of a link between the practice of child participation and the theory, building on comparisons and content analyzes, which seeks to provoke further in-depth developments in the scientific world. The need for success at a global level, coordinated both in details and within the framework by the world organizations' policies, challenges professionals working with children to recognize young people as Agents of Change. In this respect the present article provides ground based on policy decisions and practices, evidences and reasonings.

Keywords: *children, participation, decision-making, global decisions, child opinion*

АГЕНТИ НА ОБЩЕСТВЕНАТА ПРОМЯНАТА – ПОЛИТИКИ НА МЕЖДУНАРОДНИ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ПО ОТНОШЕНИЕ НА УЧАСТИЕТО НА ДЕЦАТА В ПРОЦЕСА НА ВЗЕМАНЕ НА РЕШЕНИЯ

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Абстракт: *Днес политиките на световните организации по отношение насърчаването на децата за участие в процеса на вземане на решения относно общественото развитие, се отличават с последователност и използването на нетрадиционните подходи. За съжаление този актуален проблем не е достатъчно добре проучен в различните академични изследвания. Настоящата разработка цели да анализира наличието на връзка между практиката на детско участие и теорията, стъпвайки на сравнения и контент-анализи, с което иска да провокира бъдещи по-задълбочени разработки в научния свят. Необходимостта от успех на глобално равнище, координирана както детайлно от политиките на световните организации, така и рамково, предизвиква професионалистите, работещи с деца да припознаят младите хора като Агенти на промяната. В този смисъл настоящата статия предлага основания, базирани на политически решения и практики, доказателства и разсъждения в тази посока.*

Ключови думи: *деца, участие, взимане на решения, глобални решения, детско мнение*

Child participation, in human rights discussions, as a topic, has become more and more the focus of attention of international formations in recent years. For many, it still carries the spirit of innovation (EU¹), for others it is an opportunity to highlight prominent authority (ASEAN²). For some, it is a tool for assessing democracy and respect for human rights (Council of Europe), for another is a reaction with an element of development (UN³), and for still others it is an up-hill task, which must inevitably be taken (ASEF⁴), and so on.

For the world of science, the involvement of children in decision-making processes is slightly underlined with an independent interest. On the one hand, there are some cases of scientific events that allow and involve the participation of children with their own opinion – in this respect the Bulgarian experience stands out throughout the practices of the University of Sofia and the University of Plovdiv in the frames of the scientific conferences ‘Children and Media’ and ‘Violence and 21st Century Child’ (2017). On the other hand, scientific research on child participation and scientific publications on this topic are hard to detect. Most of the available literature is tied to field practice by network organizations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and rarely governments. The thematic range of the accessed works is usually aimed to involving children in decisions related to the justice system (Bulgaria) or the social system (UK), sometimes school system (New Zealand, Australia) – when children are directly and individually affected. When studying and investigating publications of leading scientific institutions like University of Leiden, University of Sofia, University of Massachusetts and others, no researches, reports or articles devoted children’s participation in decision-making process have been found. The National University of Singapore distinguishes in the frames of its Infant and Child Language Center, encouraging the development of scientific research ‘Young Children’s Participation And Environment Measure: Cross-Cultural Adaptation And Psychometric Evaluation In Children With And Without Developmental Needs In Singapore’ (Lim, C. (2015). McMaster University), however entirely dedicated to the needs of the social, educational and health systems of Singapore.

The progress of practice in encouraging children to participate in decision-making on public development highlights the inadequacy of academic developments. With the increased investment of efforts and resources in child participation during the last three decades, the need for methodological support, analyses and scientific hypothesis for the future processes underlines the theoretical significance and provokes the modernization of scientific reading.

A lot of changes have been made worldwide during 2017 to highlight the spectrum of opportunities that participation of children in the decision-making process brings – once, as a final touch of the efforts invested nationally and internationally last decades, and second as confident motivator for those who connect their professional and every-day life with children. Stepping on the highlights, all the world organizations were looking for brighter promotion of child participation as a key factor in sustainable development for many human sphere targets.

The High Level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on Education and Sustainable Development Goals (New York, July 2017) reiterated its main message of fully involving children and young people in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda by 2030. The General Assembly believes that the success will largely depend on the ability of States to actively engage children in achieving the Goals

¹ EU – European Union

² ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

³ UN – United Nations

⁴ ASEF – Asia-Europe Foundation

through education and participation. As co-founder and co-chair of the UN group of Children's Friends (together with Luxembourg and Panama), Bulgaria has been actively contributing to the inclusion of the text on children as actors of change on the Sustainable Development Agenda, naming children "Agents of change".

However, the view of the children themselves about their participation in the decision-making process is another issue. It is not tied to the political decisions of the European Commission nor to the analyzes of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN), nor is it a tool for highlighting contemporary authority (Council of Europe) or a task with increased difficulty in the intercontinental dialogue (ASEM⁵). That is why a special event was organized in partnership between UNICEF⁶, Bulgaria, Malaysia and Argentina on 14 July 2017 in New York, as part of the High Level Policy Forum on Sustainable Development Goals. The theme of the event "Awareness and Action on Sustainable Development Goals in the Classroom: Presenting the Experience of Students" created the opportunity for more than 80 children from all over the world (representing 15 states from North America, Asia, Middle East and Europe) to express opinions and participate directly with proposals on the Sustainable Development Goals.

The approach of the UN initiative (fully involving children) was not found in the scientific events of the two Bulgarian Universities that dared to include youth's opinion as part of the academical curriculum of the conferences mentioned above. The UN approach first recognizes children as able to participate in serious challenges, even at global level, and second creates opportunities to shift the regular approach by matching children's ideas and positions. Young people promote concrete initiatives to overcome the global challenges throughout sustainable patterns of behavior that work in people's everyday lives, that apply to their families and communities. The distant position of the young people allows a different view on the final results and the impact these results bring for the community and the population in general:

"The global goals are like a jigsaw puzzle. The more pieces joined together, the more people working on it, the easier the puzzle becomes and the closer you are to achieving the picture. Thanks to your leadership and foresight in involving and bringing us as children here, our partnership connects two pieces allowing us to accelerate the changes you want to see."

"Everyone has a role to play in achieving the global goals, so a whole generation can't be ignored. The younger generation always has to deal with the problems created by the generation above."

"We are in a unique position to see what has gone wrong, because we have new influences and experiences. But this tradition has now spiraled out of control to a critical level. Which is why you need us too. We can provide an army of energy, support and innovation. So why wait? We as children are perfectly capable of making a difference. We can influence others especially through our power to influence adults and develop good habits"

"Although our actions may seem too small to consider when you deal with such serious and large-scale problems, it is these changes, which make the difference, because people can make them. Talking through ideas and programs doesn't work. Taking action, enforcing change does."⁷

This is the first High level event in UN history with the participation and speeches of children as part of the official agenda. It shifts the UN scenario, bringing

⁵ ASEM – Asia-Europe Meeting

⁶ UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

⁷ Chosen statements of children participated in the special event organized in partnership between UNICEF, Bulgaria, Malaysia and Argentina on 14 July 2017 in New York, as part of the High Level Policy Forum on Sustainable Development Goals

the President of the United Nations General Assembly and his team to conclusions that insist inclusive behavior for all the political decisions at global level - together with children. In the academical world Nigel Tomas admits in his article "Towards a Theory of Children's Participation" (Tomas, N. International Journal of Children's Rights (2007), p. 199-218) that legal theorists and philosophers are still debating whether children have rights to participate in public decision-making. In the same time dynamics of the world leaders articulates powerful arguments that children in deed pushed the boundaries beyond protection. The concentration on young people's participation in the public decision-making connects to academic theorizations of civil society, governance, social capital, etc.

The term 'participation' in the children's field tends to have positive associations, seen as inevitably a 'good thing', something to be promoted, something that should be beneficial to all involved. In accordance with Nigel Tomas belief that participation activities have blossomed, engagement of the adult world to promote and to support such activities is under the spotlight. The 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights (Sofia, November 2017) has created a platform for the promotion of children's participation. Their participation was valued by participants from over 50 countries at the highest level not only as innovative, but also as necessary, sought after and natural. That was a key event in the field of children's rights as the participation of children is also included in the calendar and priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The lessons and conclusions that the 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights has created for children's rights were trying to build a bridge between the understanding of adult decision-makers and the young-power positions on the participation of children in decision making processes. The discussions highlighted the essential role of the children to the sustainable development goals; gave a view of the provocative participation children held in the academic debate with the professors from different universities; and promoted children reflections on the children's rights agenda. In accordance to the spirit of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Bulgaria proposed the event to be graced with direct presence of children from Asia-Europe Foundation's member states⁸ as part of national delegations.

The knowledge gathered from the 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights promoted further the policies in this constantly developing field. As Bulgaria strives to be the frontrunner for positive changes in the area of the rights of the child, the aim to establish tangible relations between the rights of the child and the UN Sustainable Development Goals was underlined. The participation of children in the 17th Human Rights Seminar is an innovation for ASEM. And more, children's presentation and conclusions are a wake-up call for all Member States that human rights policies cannot be created and developed without the participation and voice of young people who are future leaders in their countries. Almost 40 children aged 14-18 years attend the event, presenting ASEM member states like Vietnam, Pakistan, Mongolia, Japan, Slovakia, Switzerland, Check republic, Bulgaria, etc. Young people discussed over the entire Concept Paper topics and gave their opinion and suggestions to the European-Asian policy on human rights. This was in conjunction with more than 120 adult participants from Asia and Europe. Children's involvement was a challenging task that animated and sensitized the work of participating adults, making it even more effective and correct, with a view to future decisions and policies in the key area - ensuring human rights and children's rights in particular.

There are distinctions between participation and consultation of the children. Ruth Sinclair suggests that the impetus has been a convergence of new ideas from three perspectives: the consumer movement and the demand for 'user involvement'; the children's rights agenda, in particular Article 12 of the UNCRC; and a new social science paradigm

⁸ 51 European and Asian states, European union and the Secretariat of ASEAN – the Foundation of ASEM

which challenges the perception of children as incomplete adults (Sinclair, R. (2004) 'Participation in Practice: Making it Meaningful, Effective and Sustainable', Children and Society, p. 106–118). Sinclair defines the necessity to move beyond one-off or isolated participation and consider how participation becomes embedded as an integral part of our relationship with children.

The 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights stepped on children's participation by comparing adults opinions with those generated by the young participants. Children were split into three thematic working groups, mirroring the division of adults in the event. The themes of the Working Groups (WG) were designed to cover the entire spectrum of the rights of children and present possibilities to focus on challenges and offer new cutting-edge solutions. The ASEM gave children a platform to take part in meaningful debates concerning living of the adults and of the children around the world. After 2-day-long debates, children gave three main points of conclusions to each of the three working groups of the event: WG1 - State provisions for the survival and development of children; WG2 - Protection of vulnerable children and children on the move; WG3 - Participation and involvement of children in decision-making. As an enlightening experience for all, children also highlighted confidently *"Hopefully our general solutions and the spirit of our recommendations will guide future actions and bring about tangible change"* as part of their official statement during the event.

WG1 "International partnership and state provision for survival and development" started discussion with one of the most important topics – child feedback and complaint mechanisms. They found the Bulgarian model for guarantee children rights is very effective. They believe that there should be a worldwide chain of National Child Councils that represent the opinions of children all around the globe. The three main suggestions of the working group are: (1) To Create National Child Council in each State, Phone lines, Classes that teach children how to participate and express their opinion; (2) Ensuring Financial support (Free daycare) Monitoring of processes; (3) Create Work-shops for parents and Youth classes that teach students to combat violence and injustice.

Although the seminar didn't have vulnerable children among the participants to face the issues first-hand, the children declared that they take this opportunity to step in the shoes of vulnerable children and as a collective represented them. The process in WG2 "Protection of vulnerable children and children on the move" drew the knowledge of vulnerable children around. The group worked about making life of vulnerable children better. They think that the integration of all vulnerable groups of children is the most important thing that they have to focus on. All the things that children said are some of solutions – the general solutions, that will help to overcome part of the most stressful problems connected with vulnerable children. The suggestions were formed as follows: (1) Improving rehabilitation centers and programs for vulnerable children such as those involved in armed conflicts; (2) Reforming education system by special education programs for students with disabilities; including school subjects to inform them about their rights and the way to access them; (3) Ensuring justice for children by including justice achieves and attorneys in social movements for children rights and the formation of specialization.

The right to be heard and the right to participate are of the most fundamental rights illustrated in the CRC, however the practice over the last decades shows the continuous need of improvement of the implementation of the Convention.

WG3 "Participation and involvement of children in the decision-making" point its mandate. The young people believe that children need to know and to be aware of their rights; to have basic educational support for children's rights full understanding in all levels from family to school. They believe that not only awareness is important, but also action. The involvement of all children regardless of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or disability in

decision making is then most important for their present and future. The children need to be supported when speaking out and have their opinions taken into account. Their primary concern is awareness and implementing mechanisms that empower children to involve themselves in decision-making. Their suggestions were enclosed in the three following: (1) Raising worldwide awareness on regional level about child participation opportunities; (2) Establishing an international forum for sharing child participation practices; (3) Improvement of effectiveness of the communication between children and decision makers.

The year 2017 was crucial for the development of ASEM as it marked the 20th anniversary of ASEM, but also because it offers an excellent opportunity to further develop and strengthen the policies on the rights of the child through open and inclusive dialogue between partners from Asia and Europe. As a result of the successful conduct of the 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights together with children, the final document of the 13th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of ASEM (Myanmar, November 2017) explicitly underlined the commitment of governments (at the governmental level) to ensure conditions for enforcing human rights and fundamental freedoms of all citizens. In order to achieve this objective, the countries underlined the important role of governments, international and regional human rights organizations, civil society, and to rely on the successful example of dialogue and exchange of good practices as the seminar in Sofia gave by integrating children in the decision-making process.

Andrena Norrish investigates the key competences of the children in participation and contribution (Norrish, A. (2015) To Investigate 'Participating and Contributing' Key Competency Development with a Future Focus, within the Reggio Emilia-Inspired Approach) focusing on shifts in thinking and practice that are not quick fixes, but will need to be unraveled carefully if adults are to engage young people in public decision-making, develop their love of learning, and enable them to face the real challenges of the twenty-first century. Some of the feedbacks children gave during their participation in the 17th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights showed explicitly the normality of such approach (still called "innovative" by the adults) in the political dialogue on human rights and children's rights. Children's expectations to adults are much bigger than adult expectations to children:

"It was interesting to be a part of a real life political forum because I actually felt involved and respected in my ideas of what children's rights should entail. I think making us a part of the seminar brought in a genuine perspective: as children of today we know what the world is like for us, and ultimately only children can give the most relevant opinions on what children's rights are: because we are children. Including children and youth in high politics is really smart: it's the only way to get fresh and honest perspectives on the issues facing children. This was also reinforced by the fact that most of our ideas ended up being the same, if not better than, the adults. It was also just incredibly enriching and enlightening to be a part of, and to understand all the different perspectives in the equation." Nadine Pheby, Slovakia

"The chance to express the children's views on the issues that concern us and we were heard made me believe that the effect would be even greater if, instead of being in a separate group, we were divided into adult groups. The view of the children would have been even more useful if foreign children were selected from different social strata and regions. In this respect, it is an impression that the Bulgarian model of child participation is an indisputable leader on an international level" Iva Ivanova, Council of Children, Bulgaria

"The ASEM meeting helped me to see the world from a very different angle, but also to make sure that people can be equally gorgeous everywhere. Everyone presented the specific problems of their community, but together we sought global solutions, struggling to make the future brighter for all. I believe we will succeed!" Janin Al-Shargabi

Children's expectations are to go beyond the adult understanding of "ambitious", if ambitious is one of the names of the active involvement of the children in the decision-making process. Individuals and nations are confident that the European-Asian union will not face any barriers in creating special web-dialogue form within ASEF for sensitizing the children for their active inclusion to the future as a reality. The understanding that the European-Asian union will neither force any limits to initiate bolder political statements on the rights of the children to be heard and listened to with respect is also relevant.

Described international targeted and specialized events on children's rights outlined a new trend towards understanding policy-making at the international and global level and theorizing the processes – a fact that surprised everyone but the children. The Center for Educational Research and Innovation published the Analyses of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development named 21st Century Learning: Research, Innovation and Policy Directions with special focus on the call for new approaches from „Schooling for Tomorrow“. It shows that a radical change with a strong focus on learning has not only been called for by learning scientists, but also by some very near to policy-making at different times. Matching the timing is one of the issues underlined in children's exposes during the specialized international events described above: as a tool for combating the gaps and linking the successes.

Globally and internationally conducted events enable opportunities and benefits to be gained from the active inclusion of children in the decision-making processes that concern them. Although it is natural to raise the question of which decisions are not directly concerned with children, recognizing them as agents of change (UN), it is important to track the opportunity of effective adult-children dialogue at school level, local community, national practices, interregional relationships and others. Tracking should include indicators that highlight the selection of the children involved, the regulation of participation, the level of respect for the proposals they generate, the possibility of involving more young people, the transparency of the process and the responsibility of the children themselves to the child population. Child reflection could be different in the various conditions of participation, although the scope is matched. The public significance of reflection itself is one aspect of the importance of the process itself, the significance and efficiency for the children themselves is different, and the individual impact on each participating child is, of course, a third incision of every child's participation.

All these issues and data put a different perspective on the interpretation of Art. 12 of the CRC and create conditions for updating the list of stakeholders that are expected to participate in its implementation. Professional pedagogics, pedagogical assistants, local community administrators, social workers, public defenders and many others could be just a hint for the new professional curriculum that academic world is challenged to face and answer. Andrena Norrish believes that increased student participation and contribution should be enabled, engagement in learning should be promoted and a more meaningful and authentic learning approach should be provided to prepare the children to walk the world stage. Any form throughout which the child is given more opportunities to be an active participant in the process of public decisions, is an independent objective to which scientific and institutional efforts should and must be directed.

Despite the commitment of the states who ratified the CRC to unconditionally encourage and support the participation of children and parents, local community leaders and other key actors like teachers, politicians, ombudsmen, etc., these processes are traditionally related to the development and implementation of preventive or supportive programs. These programs see the children as the object of care and special protection. The quality of child participation in public decisions can be a key factor of success when it is in solidarity with the concept of UN Sustainable Development Goals, where children are already recognized as

'agents of change'. In this case is relevant a number of questions to be risen and to be in the focus of future developed studies: (1) are the living conditions factor of the success in participation of children in decision-making; (2) are children able to express opinion to all global and local processes in their societies; (3) is the quality of child participation related with the positive change of all stakeholders in the societies (or only those directly involved with children are enough); (4) is the prism of engaging children in the day-to-day decision-making process enough to brake the status-quo and lead to global targets in successful and sustainable development; (5) is the intensity of the global high-level events enough to motivate qualitative study of child participation in public decision-making process; (6) is the full social realization of young people new vision of a different paradigm for sustainable development; (7) what adult world is ready to offer to a participating child?

Expanding the possibilities and improving the means of ensuring child participation in the planning and implementation of all public policies relevant to the well-being of the child is of strategic importance. Tisdall and Davis (Tisdall, K. and Davis, J. (2004) 'Making a Difference? Bringing Children's and Young People's Views into Policy-making', *Children and Society*, p. 131–142) argue that many projects fail to achieve tangible outcomes because they are inappropriately selective in the types of children they recruit, do not enable children to take decision-making positions, and fail to create long term dialogue between children and decision-makers. In his work on theorizing child participation, Tomas suggests 5 pillars: a) encompass all the sites where children's participation may or may not take place; b) be located in a broader context of inter-generational relations; c) understand the distinction between 'participation' meaning activity that children engage in conjointly with adults, and children and young people's autonomous activity; d) accommodate the new kinds of participatory practice with children and young people that have been developed (particularly in countries of the majority world); e) account for the demands for children and young people to have the same political rights as adults.

The ability to step on identified new active element in processes of public progress – agents of change – needs theoretical support politically and sociologically, in institutional and legal contests, respecting philosophical and cultural disposition in minimizing adult domination. If world organizations are demonstrating practically that children and young people are no longer recognized as most markedly dominated group in society, then it worth active dedication in contemporizing studies that underpin them.

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